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MISTAKES OFTEN MADE BY PRINCIPALS—PART I

FRANKLIN BOBBITT

School of Education, University of Chicago

Whenever a road is to be traveled which is difficult because of pitfalls on either side, one of the most practical things is to know the nature and location of these pitfalls. Consciously to avoid falling into them is part of the task of traveling the road.

The principal of a building has an endlessly complicated series of tasks to perform; or, to continue the analogy, he has a most difficult road to travel. It is obscure and ill-defined in many, even most, of its parts; there are innumerable pitfalls into which he may easily stumble; and false trails of many kinds lead off into wrong directions. One of the most practical things for a principal, therefore, is to know the kinds of mistakes that it is possible for him to make, and against which he must therefore be consciously on guard. This is of course especially true for the younger inexperienced principals who are in the stage of professional habit-formation.

We have assembled a list of possible mistakes by drawing on the actual experiences and observations of several hundred superintendents, principals, and teachers. They were asked to mention specific mistakes which they had actually met with. Those most frequently mentioned are here enumerated.

1. Autocratic and arbitrary direction of work and of the general affairs of the building. This is the error of management most frequently referred to, and it is the thing in connection with which the most bitterness was evident in the expressions of those mentioning it. The following are typical:

“Our principal never seemed to think that his teachers’ opinions counted. He never consulted with them when he was about to make a change in the school management. He merely sent a note to each saying that hereafter things would be done thus and so.”

“The principal was jealous of his power and authority and refused to delegate responsibility to his teachers.”

“He did not seem to realize that he was dealing with *live* thinking material, both in teacher and pupil. In thus failing to deal humanly with human beings, he failed to awaken proper effort on the part of the teachers.”

"He interfered too much in the teacher's work and did not permit her to do her own thinking."

"He was afflicted with a sense of superiority and his attitude toward teachers was haughty and domineering."

"Our principal tries to do altogether too much. He lacks confidence in his teachers and feels that he must do most of their thinking for them."

"He failed or refused to take teachers, pupils, and parents into his confidence."

The mistake here is the violation of one of the basic principles of good management—one which is, however, inadequately recognized even by many of our progressive professional leaders. It may be stated about as follows: In the performance of a complicated task which involves the co-operative efforts of skilled specialists upon different levels of specialization, those nearest the detailed labors to be performed should be responsible for much initiative in proposing plans of detailed procedure, while those specialists of more general type, who stand nearest the ultimate sources of authority, should be responsible for approval of the detailed plans before they are put into actual operation.

Reduced to more concrete terms, this means that teachers, those who are in position best to know the individual children and their specific needs from day to day, and who are nearest to, and responsible for, the detailed labors, should be continually taking the initiative concerning the details of courses of study, choice of text and supplementary books, methods, supplies, distribution of time, classification and grouping of pupils, etc. They have not merely a right to do this—their position within the organization makes it their duty. The principal should not merely give teachers the opportunity to take such initiative but he should place it upon them as a responsibility to be efficiently absolved—under penalty of dismissal for inefficient performance.

The principal's direction of the work should be largely the stimulation of teachers to provide detailed plans of work, and the emendation and approval of such plans in conferences with the teachers. Only thus can there be democracy and normal human relationships within the organization. These latter, however, are not ends, but rather means. If autocracy in the long run could be more efficient, it should probably be employed. The major objection is that it fails to utilize the abilities, the thought, and the initiative of those nearest the work who are therefore in the best position to know what in detail is to be done. Democracy is to be

employed because it stimulates a far greater amount of thinking and unlocks greater stores of energy. Naturally it requires proper organization and leadership.

2. *Taking care of matters personally that ought to be delegated.* This mistake is closely related to the preceding. They are cognate errors and frequently, perhaps usually, are found together. The second is well illustrated by the following actual instance:

Principal X took charge of a well-organized elementary school of 1,800 pupils and 40 teachers. The school had developed a strong social and co-operative spirit. The teachers were organized into many working committees along educational lines as well as for the more efficient performance of many of the purely mechanical duties connected with a large organization. For example, the care of, and distribution of, supplies were handled by one of the seventh-grade rooms; the ordering and distribution of handwork materials were done by a small committee of teachers; the selection of supplementary readers by another group, etc.

As soon as possible after assuming control, Principal X took from these specialized groups all these detailed duties. He wanted to do them *all himself*. As a consequence his office is swamped with a mass of detail and he is kept almost entirely from the greater work of supervision. As a further result he has killed, absolutely, the co-operative spirit. He has discontinued all teachers' meetings for the purpose of discussion of educational aims and practices, and as a substitute calls the teachers together only for the purpose of giving instructions as to when he wants this or that report, or as to the manner in which he wants this or that petty detail carried out. As a result he has taken from the teaching corps the inspiration that comes from group discussion and from co-operative effort. On account of this and the lack of supervision, the school is breaking up into various units, each working along after its own fashion.

Let a man have ever so much educational zeal and let him disinterestedly spend himself without stint or limit for the good of the cause in a building of 1,800 pupils, he can do but a small fraction of the total task. He should know that his main business is *to get work done*, not to do it himself. In the case cited, the root of the trouble may be various things: an inordinate love of power, lack of confidence in his teachers, failure to organize the factors of the situation sufficiently for delegation without confusion or dispersion of responsibility, or a wrong theory of management. But whatever be the cause, the result is a violation of the principle of good management already presented.

3. *Trying to take care of too many things at once.* This is not in itself an error. As a matter of fact, the principal is made responsible for all of the activities going on within his building. These are very

numerous and of a highly diverse character. Nevertheless, he is responsible for seeing that they are all properly performed. His task, however, is not to do them himself, but to get them done by the total group of which he is leader. The mistake here referred to is failure to develop a form of organization and a technique of delegating functions which will permit him to hand the various activities over to others, and in the failure at the same time to develop a technique of inspecting the labors delegated to others so as to keep them at all times on a proper plane of efficiency. All principals at the present time are greatly in need of a manual on the technique of the delegation of functions.

4. *Lack of interest in teachers' experiments.* Most of the work of the thoughtful teacher at present is of an experimental nature. Educational science is yet only in its infancy and none can speak with certainty as to the best methods or materials to be employed in the application of general principles to the great majority of problems met with in the classroom. As a consequence, teachers must be continually trying out different methods of organizing their materials, different kinds of textbooks, supplementary and oral material, different methods of stimulating pupils to take advantage of their opportunities, etc. Every teacher should be continually taking the initiative in drawing up plans for the solution of the innumerable detailed problems currently met with, and the principal should at all times be associated with the teacher in this thinking and planning. He should stimulate, discuss possibilities, suggest other improvements, and approve all plans before they are put into operation. The principal who is not constantly in intimate contact with the thinking of the teachers is failing in the highest function of all.

5. *Unconsciously creating weaknesses in teachers by withholding responsibility.* Strength of any kind is begotten through the exercise of function. Those who think and plan acquire the power to think and plan, while those from whom this responsibility is withheld lose their powers of independent thought and become increasingly dependent upon others. Where a principal says that experienced teachers are unfitted to bear responsibility for initiative, this condition is often created by a type of supervision that holds them continually in a condition of intellectual servitude. Make teachers responsible for initiative and vigorous thought, provide the neces-

sary supervisory stimulation, contagion, and leadership, and all who are worthy of the position of teacher can rise to the requisite levels of professional ability. Those who cannot are mental and social incompetents who should be eliminated from the profession.

6. *Taking to himself credit for all successes in the school.* The director of a university training school writes:

I have in mind cases in which the building principals wanted everything to be credited as emanating from them. If a teacher started some creditable innovation or made some commendable improvement, the principal would immediately take it over and claim all credit for it. Principals, in fact, have been known to stifle initiative in teachers for fear that they might receive recognition for laudable suggestions or improvements which they did not themselves happen to think of first and set in motion.

The work of the principal can be described as leadership in the performance of a large co-operative task. The wise leader gives full recognition to all commendable efforts on the part of his followers. Only in their success is he himself successful. Only in maximum accomplishment on their part can there result maximum accomplishment on his part as leader. To repress them or to inhibit effort by stealing the credit that they have earned is to destroy his own chances of success. The effective leader is big enough to see the relations of these factors. The one who is so petty that he cannot see wherein his own success lies has no place in a position of leadership. It is unnecessary to refer to the ethical relationships involved. The error spells ineffectiveness or failure in the work of the school, and is therefore to be condemned on this purely professional basis.

7. *Feebleness or absence of directive effort.* Most of the errors discussed above relate to some aspect of overdirection on the part of the principal. Here we meet with the error of underdirection. The principal is passive and lets the activities of the building go their own gait so long as they go smoothly and unobtrusively. Teachers are expected to do about all of the thinking and planning as well as the actual work. The successful room is the one that makes the least disturbance and which creates the fewest problems. It is very common for teachers to say, "Our principal never gives us any constructive suggestions as to how any of our tasks are to be performed."

While teachers must be expected largely to take the initiative as to details, certainly principals must be continually taking the initia-

tive in the formulation and expression of general policies to be pursued in connection with any and every aspect of the work going on within the building. The principal, for example, is responsible for securing all of the results that are to accrue from the teaching of reading in the building. He is not expected to do the teaching, but it is expected that he shall, through the teachers, secure the results. If he would do his part effectively and if he would be sure at all times that he is doing his full part in getting the teachers to perform their full part, then it is necessary that he know, so far as our profession can now know, the sorts of things that ought to be going on within the classrooms where reading is being taught. He cannot know the personal idiosyncrasies of the individual pupils so well as the teacher, nor can he know the particular degree of advancement of each of these pupils; consequently, he is not so fully in position to make choice of the particular reading selections that are to be employed or of the specific aspects of method. But he should have sufficient knowledge of the kind of selections that ought to be employed to secure desired results and of the general types of methods to be employed in the uses of those materials. He should see that teachers are at all times informed of the general principles involved and that they are using them for the direction of their work. Since they are usually undertrained and underexperienced at the present time and therefore inadequately informed concerning general principles and modes of specific application, and since they are so enmeshed in the details of their current labors that they easily lose sight of some things while giving attention to others, quite obviously it is the duty of the principal to be continually calling teachers' attention to things which they do not know or which they are overlooking. As they plan their work previous to its performance, the principal will need to keep continually conversant with their plans and to be continually making suggestions for emendation and improvement. In association with the teachers of the building he must be continually doing a part of the thinking concerning the work of the various subjects in the various classrooms. Only thus can he fully perform the function of professional leadership in the work. When he confines himself to the routine of the office and merely takes care of the odd-job work about the building and fails to provide this professional leadership in the work of the classrooms, he really is not principal of the building at all. Ofttimes he becomes

little more than a mere unskilled, unprofessional, odd-job man engaged in oiling the places in the machinery which have a tendency to creak. Either he has never assumed his proper function or he has abdicated.

It is quite true that a principal has other fundamental things besides direction which he must do. The directorial function, however, is primordial. If he does not properly perform it, he is not in proper relation to the situation rightly to perform any of his other functions. The matter is serious because of the frequency of this error. The first cause for this lack of directorial effort may be found in the position of the principal. It is such that it is very easy for him to fail to perform his directorial duty. The school board and the superintendent, with his professional staff, are in large degree determining the general policies of the system, laying out the courses of study in detail, selecting text and supplementary books, supplies and equipment, and otherwise very fully determining policies and procedure for the school system. As these things are done by the superintendent he usually has mainly in mind the activities of the teachers in the classrooms. He does not usually have sufficiently in mind any placing of responsibility upon the building principal for adaptation of his general policies to the specific building needs. All too often he is afflicted with the obsession of uniformity and really expects the same kind of work to be going on in all buildings, however diverse the conditions within the district. He expects, therefore, the principal merely to pass on to the teachers things that have been formulated in his central office. He does not expect principals to think and plan for their buildings. With his professional advisers, he is doing their thinking for them. He places principals in such a state of tutelage and gives to them such a mechanical series of labors that they lose their powers all too frequently to think, plan, and lead forcefully in the thought of the building. Quite obviously, the shortcomings in the performance of the principal here discussed are oftentimes induced by autocracy and arbitrariness in the offices of the official superiors. The superintendent is making the same sort of mistake in his dealings with his principals that the principal can make in dealing with his teachers. The result in either case is a withering of the professional personality.

A second cause for this error of underdirection may be that the principal is professionally ignorant. He may not himself know what ought to be going on in teaching the different subjects in the different grades, in adapting courses of study, in selecting the best materials, etc. In such case he finds it very convenient indeed to fall back upon the slogan of professional democracy and to advocate the "hands-off" policy of giving teachers full initiative and full responsibility. In such case, however, he is not prepared to enforce responsibility. Let him complete his ideas as to the various things to be done where the work of a building is to be both democratic and effective and he will see that his plea for democracy is mere evasion of responsibility. It is quite true that we should have democracy of management, but abdication of responsibility on the part of the principal is not the method of bringing about such democracy. Its outcome is nothing other than professional anarchy within the building—using the term in its etymological sense.

A third cause of this error, closely related to the other two, is intellectual slackness or laziness. It is human nature to follow the lines of least resistance. When the system is so organized that the superintendent and his specialized advisers are expected to do most of the thinking for the system and the classroom teachers are expected to carry out the details of routine labors demanded by this centralized thinking, the line of least resistance for the principal is simply to pass on the directions from the central office to the teachers, leaving the responsibility for actual work at the two extremes of the line. He is but an intermediating cog that is mostly inert, except as it is moved by those between whom he intermediates. His professional indolence may thus be easily an induced condition resulting from an erroneous conception of organization and management within the general system.

A fourth cause is professional timidity. The traditional practices are always those that are approved and accepted by the majority of men. This seems to be especially true in the field of education. To attempt improvement is always to attempt some degree of innovation. It is to espouse the suggestion of a small minority. It is usually a thinking, and generally a rather quiet, minority, whereas the great unthinking majority is unhesitatingly vocal and violent in opposition to any departure from the traditional grooves. Like everybody else, the principal quite commend-

ably desires permanence of tenure. He knows that the fewer the innovations the more smoothly the mechanism will run and therefore the less opposition to himself, his policies, and his work will be awakened within the community.

A fifth cause is the general professional failure to develop a technique of organization and management which definitizes the functions to be performed by the principals and which presents to them a technique of action in the performance of their proper directorial functions. For this deficiency their official superiors are more responsible than they. The responsibility also rests upon those who have been training administrators and supervisors in our normal schools, teachers' colleges, and schools of education.

As principals become conscious of the nature and the seriousness of the error here referred to, it becomes incumbent upon them to remove the various operative causes of the error and thereby eliminate the error itself. Not to inform themselves as to the situation and the possibilities and not to exert themselves by way of remedy is to be guilty of the error of omission.

8. Frequent change of policy. One principal writes as follows:

The most serious mistake a principal can make is the constant change of policy. I have in mind a principal who is excellent in devising new plans but they never result in anything like the expected accomplishment. The reason is perfectly clear. The principal never gives his teachers opportunity to work out his plans before he changes them and substitutes others of a quite different character.

Another quite successful principal writes as follows:

The principal whom I have in mind was of the studious, thoughtful type and possessed of large educational zeal. He acted hastily in inaugurating new ideas and plans as supervisor. In many instances he would institute a new plan on one day and change it the next day or the next week. The result was continual confusion, keeping him nervous, irritable, and sensitive. After two years he resigned his position a disappointed man. Naturally his teachers were kept continually nervous and confused in their ideas as to what was to be done.

It is not surprising to find this type of mistake made by progressive-minded principals at the present time. Educational aims and methods are unsettled and the educational needs of society are diverse. Educational thought is very confused, but significant insights on the part of social and educational leaders, as presented in our professional literature, are very numerous. In large measure the leaders have not synthesized and harmonized these various insights. Practical men cannot wait until the leaders have

completed their work. They must secure such insights as they can and proceed upon such bases. They find themselves, however, hampered by their own burden of traditional thinking, by the attitudes of teachers and community, by the nature of courses of study, textbooks, and the general equipment of the schools, etc. It is natural for them to try to find a way first in one direction, and then in another. Efforts of this character are apt to indicate a superior but insufficiently informed type of man. If mistakes are to be classified in degree of peccability, then this should probably be considered less reprehensible than the stagnation which results in the case of those who indolently refrain from any effort at progress. It is less blameworthy to try earnestly and fail than lazily not to try.

The mistake is a serious one, however, and ought not to be made. It results from following partial insights rather than following the dictates of a broadly conceived and well-integrated general policy which provides in a balanced way for the efficient continuance of the work as it has developed through the years, and at the same time provides methods of making continuous and gradual improvements within this work. The man who makes this mistake is apt to be a student, but he is in that stage of understanding which we have in mind in the use of the old proverb: "A little learning is a dangerous thing." This type of man cannot usually be cured through repression. This would only destroy him. The only cure is the building out of his insights and their integration. He needs books, opportunities for study, and professional courses in normal schools or universities.

Thus far we have dealt with weaknesses in the principal's performance of the directorial function. In the continuation of this discussion next month, we shall enumerate errors in the performance of the inspectorial function.

[To be concluded]